

A SINGULAR DECEPTION: Audition pieces

DR JAMES BARRY (F, white, small, slight, playing early teens-71)

1 **FIRST MEETING:** Barry is newly qualified, and her mentors have sent John to act as her manservant. She is resistant and cautious

Barry You make a considerable sacrifice, then, coming to serve me. (*A beat*) But, in truth life so often demands sacrifices, does it not?

John A sacrifice presupposes a choice. Master.

Barry Indeed. (*Beat*) John, I, perhaps more than most, understand the constraints life can place upon us. I would not – will not – take you into my household without your consent. You would be free to go at any time. Do I make myself clear?

John (*Astonished*) Master?

Barry Nor will you call me master. Doctor or sir, yes. But master, never. Are we agreed?

John Yes, mas– sir.

Barry Well then. (*Carefully*) I am a very private person, John, as it seems are you. Yes, very private with some, shall we say, unusual – peculiar even - habits. You must understand that. (*She waits for John's nod*) I have a public life, of course. Very public. Much in demand. Constantly under scrutiny. Intense scrutiny. But in private ...

John Yes, sir.

Barry ... in private, there are certain ... *requirements* that must be met. Without exception. You, and only you, will be permitted entry to my bed chamber. Ever. Do you understand?

John nods

Barry Can you read, John?

John (*Cautiously*) That is not permitted, master. (*A look from Barry*) Sir.

Barry I am well aware of the oppressive slavery laws, John, but you speak as an educated man so, I ask you again, can you read?

John ... yes, sir. And write.

Barry Good. And wounds, blood, do they distress you?

John I have seen blood many times, sir.

Barry I'm sure. *(Beat)* Among other duties, I will require your assistance with ... my laundry. My undergarments especially. And also in my work on occasion. Do you ride?

John No, doctor, but I have seen how men ride.

Barry Then you will learn. *(Beat)* So, it seems, whether I will or no, I am to have – if you agree – a manservant.

John Dr Barry, I will serve you to the best of my ability. Always.

Barry inspects John for a long moment

Barry Yes, I believe you will. *(Beat)* Do you like dogs, John?

2 **EDINBURGH.** Barry encounters a fellow medical student (Jobson). Barry is in her early teens

Barry So, to Edinburgh. 1810. *(She dons a surcoat. She looks around nervously. She is in her early teens. The soundscape of a busy early nineteenth century city. She has a faint Irish accent, which she later eradicates)* The Medical School of Edinburgh University. Those magnificent buildings, the hallowed halls of learning, the intricate mysteries and beauties of our frail bodies revealed ...

Jobson, a fellow student, Scottish, is vomiting copiously into the gutter outside the dissection room. Barry steps away to avoid any splashes on her clothes

Jobson Apologies, sir. A weak stomach. Ye didnae appear tae even blench when Mr Fyfe incised the abdomen and all they guts –

Barry Why would I? The human corpse is endlessly fascinating. Endlessly instructive. Forgive me –

Barry goes to leave

Jobson Mr Barry, is it, eh? *(Proffering a hand)* Jobson. *(After a momentary hesitation on Barry's part (is the hand germ-free?) they shake)* Ye've a strang handshake, sir!

Barry Why should I not?

Jobson Ah meant no offence. Only that, forgive me, ye're exceeding young. A prodigy, they say.

Barry So I'm told.

Jobson And no' from these pairts.

Barry does not reply

Jobson Frae Scotland, Ah mean.

A beat

Barry Ireland. Now, if you will excuse –

Jobson Ah've observed ye in oor lectures.

Barry Observed me? Why?

Jobson I thocht ye could use a pal. Ye seem tae be ...

Barry Yes?

Jobson Forgive ma manners, but ye appear ... very solitary.

Barry I am very *busy*! Studying. Learning. I do not have time –

Jobson And Ah heard tell that ye'd taen a batterin' the nicht. A bloody nose. I wondered if mebbe Ah might help.

Barry Who told you ... Help how?

Jobson Ah fecht. Ye ken? (*He demonstrates*) Ah box.

Barry Oh. And?

Jobson Weel, bein' handy wi' yer fists is no bad thing, eh. And when ye're ... lacking a wee bit in height, it can prove even more effective.

Barry How so?

Jobson The element of surprise. (*He feints a jab, and Barry falls back, startled*) Ye ken? Bullies dinnae expect those slighter than theyselves tae retaliate. (*Beat*) If ye'd permit me, Ah cud teach ye.

Barry (*with difficulty*) That would be most kind, sir.

3 CAPE TOWN. Barry and John have established their routine. John is refusing to let Barry's poodle Psyche into the bedroom while she is dressing

Barry Why must you tease her so? She only wants her master. Tighter! I want ... less at the top. And a waist.

John Tease? Tease is it? This one is by far the most unruly of your infernal Psyches. And let her in while you dress after she shredded your corset?

Barry Not corset! Brace. *Brace!* It is for my spine. A support.

John rolls his eyes

John Brace, then, if you must.

Barry John, I have warned you before – Are you bleeding? I don't want blood on my uniform.

John And where should we find another cor - *brace* in this godforsaken backwater? This is Africa, not London!

Barry We should have one made.

John Oh, really? And how would I explain that? (*Mimicking a native*) Massa wants dem damn-fool brace, plenty bones, plenty metal –

Barry You forget your station, sir.

John Yes, doctor.

Barry snaps her fingers and points at a pile of clothes. Through the following, John and she get her into her uniform. Once the jacket is on, John pads out the shoulders with the kapok to broaden them

Barry I shall be attending the Cape Ball this evening.

John Evening wear, I presume, sir?

A knock. They both freeze

John (*Speeding up even more with the dressing*) Not now! Doctor Barry is not ready!

They wait as footsteps outside the door recede. Carry on

Barry My green satin breeches, the coat with the yellow lining –

John The green satin ...?

Barry I am inordinately fond of them.

John Yes, sir, indeed you are.

Barry Is there something you wish to say, John?

John Only they are very ... bright, sir. Flamboyant.

Barry Yes, are they not? I have been complimented on them – the fabric, the fit – many times.

4 THE CAESAREAN (Barry is about to perform a Caesarean, without anaesthetic, an operation she has never performed before)

Barry Mrs Munnik, my name is Dr Barry. Your husband has called me to your side to help you. I need you to be very brave. (*To unseen helpers*) Hold her arms and legs please. Tight as you can. (*John splays his legs and puts his arms above his head as though tethered*) Madam, your baby is getting weaker, as are you. For three days, you have laboured to bring him forth. But you cannot. Now, I ask you to pray to God to help you – and me. Look at me. Do you trust me? (*Mrs Munnik nods*) You must trust me. There is only one way to save the life of your child. And, I will not lie you, yours. You are both in perilous danger. Now, in a moment, I am going to cut across your belly and then, very carefully, I am going to lift the baby out. (*Moans of terror*) Think of ice, Mrs Munnik. Give her more brandy! Think simply of a pen being drawn across the belly, a cold thin pen, that is all. Have courage. I will be quick. (*The screams rise to a crescendo, as Barry incises the belly, parts the organs and lifts out the baby.*) Scissors, quickly! (*She cuts the cord. A cry. She cradles the child. A moment of tenderness. She places the baby at the breast*) A fine boy, my dear. Just two more minutes, Mrs Munnik, brave lady. Two minutes only while I repair the wound. Look only to the child. Think only of him.

5 DISMISSAL (Dr Barry is old and very sick, defending her career in front of a panel)

Barry Gentlemen, barely had I set foot ashore in Liverpool after the long voyage home from Canada when, to my astonishment, I was summoned before this Medical Board. To plead for my position! I hold the highest medical rank in the Army! For over four decades I have served the Crown as an officer in the Army in countless countries. I have braved storm and tempest, riot and revolution to provide the finest medical care to all and sundry, without regard to rank or nationality. I have introduced numerous reforms to the benefit of our troops and their families. I have –

Board Dr Barry, we have your submission.

Barry – sir, permit me to –

Board We are busy men, Dr Barry. We –

Barry As I have been busy, gentlemen, for forty-six years! Yes, I have detailed all these achievements in my submission, and every document pertaining to my career is in this case, but may not a man speak also in his defence? I beseech you –

Board Very well, Dr Barry. But we look for brevity.

Barry My thanks. I will not detain you long. I will not regale you with accounts of my surgical successes – indeed, was I not the first surgeon to perform a Caesarean section where both mother and child survived?!

Board Dr Barry –

Barry Nor will I linger on my treatments for those afflicted with leprosy or disordered in mind, with my huge success in battling syphilis and *gonorrhoea* – *those twin scourges of our forces* – *with the fruits of my own research*. Introducing smallpox vaccinations long before anyone else! All I ask, gentlemen and fellow officers – although none of you I note is my senior – is to be allowed to continue my work.

Board Dr Barry, you are a sick man. The Army feels you can no longer –

Barry I was sick, exceedingly sick, that is true. A recurrence of the yellow fever that, may I point out, I contracted while in the service of the Crown! A sickness made infinitely worse by my posting to the frozen wastes of Canada. I, used only to warmth and sunshine! Even so, despite considerable opposition, I succeeded in implementing my usual improvements. But you cannot punish a man for falling sick, gentlemen.